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ABSTRACT

Counseling center efforts to establish and maintain relevant effectiveness in the services they offer, must be based on valid and reliable feedback from critical sources. Record keeping and data collection are the procedures by which this feedback can be acquired if they are designed to answer questions and do not become ends in themselves. A follow-up questionnaire and mailing procedure designed to provide both descriptive and evaluative data can be most useful in producing data useful in a number of important ways in the assessment of agency response to environmental needs. Cross-agency comparisons have great potential and emphasize the importance of the development of a data bank equipped to handle both descriptive and evaluative material. The Counseling Services Assessment Blank was recently developed and adopted, along with a standardized mailing for the evaluation of counseling center feedback through a data bank being developed at Colorado State University. This data bank will make possible agency comparisons of evaluative data for the first time. Feedback assessment of the type described here is essential for improvement in the effectiveness of both individual staff and agency programs. (Author)

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The Description and Evaluation of Counseling Center Needs and Services Through Follow-up Questionnaires

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Environmental flux and change inevitably plays a critical role in determining both direction and effectiveness of Counseling Center services. It, just as inevitably, creates two sources for potential error in center efforts to establish and maintain relevant effectiveness. The first type of error is the result of the center that builds an acceptable program of services, procedures, and policies, and then works to maintain that existing program. This center soon finds itself out of phase with environmental needs and demands and eventually becomes an agency offering irrelevant services on the one hand, and failing to offer badly needed services on the other. The second source of error applies to the center that recognizes the need for ongoing adjustments and modifications in response to environmental change, but makes them in the absence of accurate feedback so that they are in essence haphazard and often incongruent with environmental demands. In the first case, the center simply stagnates and is left behind. In the second, modification occurs, but not in response to the valid criteria of environmental feedback.

Valid and reliable feedback then, is an essential ingredient in all efforts to evaluate what exists, what ought to be implemented, and the effectiveness of that implementation. In a counseling center, this evaluation is relevant to the growth and effectiveness of both individual staff members and the center program as a whole. Many centers have at one time or another become concerned with evaluating the effectiveness of:

Individual and group counseling in general

Testing programs and the use of tests in counseling

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Vocational-Occupational information sources

Agency image as it is projected on campus

Description of the clientele served

Physical facilities

Needs and demands of the campus environment

Special service programs (e.g., skills improvement workshop)

In addition to such agency services, it is not uncommon for individuals on a staff to attempt an ongoing systematic assessment of their own individual effectiveness. An agency program evaluation may also be designed so that individual staff members have the option of retrieving data specific to the effectiveness of their performance.

Record keeping and data collection are the procedures by which a systematic and objective evaluation may occur. A number of surveys reveal that these procedures are common to almost all centers in one form or another and generate basically two kinds of data. The first is descriptive, in that it delineates such things as number of clients seen, nature and frequency of presenting problems, average number of sessions per client, client demography, nature and frequency of test usage, student to counselor ratio, etc. These data are useful in predicting and specifying future counselor load, prevalant patterns of student concern, quantitative impact of the agency on the campus population, future staffing patterns and demands, etc. This is the kind of data that center directors find essential in their efforts to justify increases in staff, salary, and service programs.

The second kind of data gathered by counseling centers is evaluative, in that it is designed to provide information pertinent to assessing the effectiveness of the service described by the first kind of data. For example, do those students

whose effectiveness is hindered by test anxiety receive counseling that reduces that anxiety and thereby improve grades? Do those students reporting loneliness and frustration in their inability to establish satisfying interpersonal relationships acquire those skills and attitudes necessary for success? And do those students requesting assistance with the selection of a major and future vocational development receive help in discovering the nature of their aptitudes and how they relate to the world of work? The difficulties that plague any attempt to assess the effects of psychotherapy also plague the attempts to collect meaningful data of this, and the fact that center directors less often find evaluative data useful in justifying the existence or expansion of services, probably explain the comparative lack of continuing, systematic attempts to collect it in centers across the country. And yet, without feedback of this nature, the process of learning to increase both program and individual effectiveness is seriously hindered.

The accumulation of both descriptive and evaluative data may be utilized in a number of important ways. Longitudinal comparisons may be made as the body of data builds over time and can be helpful in determining whether the nature of the clientele served differs from fall quarter to spring--or from the fall quarter of the preceding year. The analyses of data collected over a number of years may also provide an assessment of trends in service requests, and the center's response (or lack of it) to those trends. The center's role in terms of whether its focus is on situational adjustment as opposed to psychotherapy may for example, be assessed through the average number of sessions per client. One of the most important aspects of data collection and utilization lies in coordinating the descriptive with the evaluative. For example, <u>descriptive</u> data might reveal that an increasing number of students are requesting help with academic skills improvement and this could be interpreted as indicative of a developing

student need on campus. Evaluative feedback relative to how effectively the center is responding to these requests would be essential in the modification or development of a skills improvement program sponsored by the center. Finally, data of an evaluative nature are prerequisite to basic research into the theory and practice of counseling. Counseling Centers across the country should recognize a professional obligation to sponsor studies of this type.

Perhaps the greatest potential for data use, however, lies in inter-agency comparisons through the development of data banks. The data bank developed by Tom Magoon for the American College Personnel Associations Commission on Counseling is an example of an effort in that direction. That particular bank, however, does not provide for the collection of both descriptive and evaluative data. Its main emphasis is only the description of existing programs, policies, staffing patterns, etc. The only question relating to evaluation simply asks if there is such an effort in effect in the respondents agency. Whereas, the ACPA data bank has demonstrated its usefulness for cross-agency comparisons of descriptions of programs and services, it is not designed to handle cross-agency comparisons of staff and agency effectiveness in the implementation of those programs. A data bank dealing with both description and evaluation of counseling agencies is being developed at Colorado State University.

Procedures for the collection of data vary widely according to the resources available and the nature of the feedback desired. Evaluation may take the form of assessing specific programs and projects, or assessing many or all of the agency services offered on a routine basis with a single instrument in one gathering. Examples of the former include a study of the impact on college students of counseling informational brochures (Bigelow, Hendrix, and Jensen, 1968), a study designed to provide a follow-up evaluation of group and individual counseling (Hewer, 1967), and a study investigating student perceptions of a university

counseling center (Minge and Cass, 1966). Whereas, such evaluations are relatively limited in scope and therefore easier to complete, they are inefficient as an ongoing method in that they are usually not carried out regularly and the preparation process must be repeated with each new study undertaken. Omnibus studies, on the other hand, are designed to evaluate all or most of the crucial and routinely offered services in one coordinated effort. Once an instrument has been developed and the data collection process established, these evaluations can take place routinely with a minimum of effort and result in the production of a variety of data useful in many different ways. Through a number of agencies adopting a standardized instrument and collection technique, and pooling their data, meaningful cross-agency comparisons can be made. A systematic procedure for counseling center description, evaluation, and comparison has been developed at Colorado State University. By adopting a questionnaire designed to generate both descriptive and evaluative data, specifying a sampling procedure to be followed in the use of the instrument, and then making provision for the pooling of the results, cross-agency assessments of both description and evaluation is possible for the first time.

The Questionnaire

The Counseling Services Assessment Blank (CSAB) was recently developed for use in omnibus evaluations of services provided by counseling agencies. The instrument was designed for compatibility with the Missouri Diagnostic Classification Plan (MDCP), and elicits from respondents self-diagnoses in terms of the MDCP categories. Client's ratings of satisfaction with agency services and perceived self-growth are elicited according to the MDCP categories also so that they may be assessed in relation to the specific problems they see themselves as having.

The MDCP is a two-dimensional system of diagnostic constructs for use in counseling. It was constructed by Berezin (1957), and refined and tested by

Apostal and Miller (1959). Subsequent research by Callis and Clyde (1960), Myers, Johnson, and Cacavas (1960),Kirk (1962), Borresen (1963, 1965), Callis (1965), Shepard (1965), and Weigel, Cochenour, and Russell (1967), makes the MDCP one of the best researched of all counseling diagnostic plans. It is presented in Figure 1. Problem-Goal refers to the content of the problem for which the client desires assistance. The dimension, Cause, refers to the underlying causal factors of the content problem. The three by five scheme makes possible fifteen different diagnostic cells, each of which bears a different two-digit coding. The first digit represents the Problem-Goal, the second digit, the Cause dimension. In practice, both a primary and secondary diagnosis are typically employed. It should be noted that although the CSAB is compatible with the MDCP, its usefulness is in no way dependent upon the use of that particular diagnostic system.

The CSAB provides a demographic description of clientele which includes name, student number, age, sex, marital status, class in school, academic major, and the number of sessions the client was seen. The agency services that are evaluated includes testing programs, confidentiality, perceptions of overall individual and group counseling experience, perceptions of counselor and group members' helpfulness, physical facilities, client-perceptions of the agency's image and role in the institution, and a dialogue response. Hurst, Weigel, Thatcher, and Nyman (In press), demonstrated the utility of the CSAB in using it to provide the data necessary for an investigation of the relationship of counselor-client diagnostic agreement to perceive outcomes of counseling. They found the mean satisfaction score for each MDCP category uniquely helpful in revealing a specific phase of the agency program that was ineffective in response to an expressed student need. In adopting the CSAB for use in the Colorado State University data bank, a flexible, productive questionnaire was chosen (flexible and productive exchanges will be possible.).

Sampling Procedure

Cross-agency comparisons of service effectiveness can only be meaningful if the procedure for securing the feedback has an optimum degree of standardization. This is also true for intra-agency longitudinal studies where data collection occurs over a period of time. Standardization, however, is not the only reason for concern with the sampling technique. The effectiveness of a beautifully developed sampling instrument can be negated by an inadequate or misleading mailing technique and/or cover letter. Calahan and Meier (1939) were among the first to recognize the differential effects that particular mailing procedures have on responses to questionnaires. Research by Suchman and McCandless (1940) suggests that mail survey techniques may also have a significant effect on who ans ers the questionnaires in the first place. One of their most important conclusions is that an increase in the number of responses is directly related to a decrease in the bias of the resulting data. Robin (1965) surveyed literature pertinent to the possible differences between respondents and nonrespondents to mail questionnaires and found that on most variables there seems to be no difference, but in investigations concerned with opinions, values, and psychological characteristics, apparent differences are more likely. This possibility is of critical importance for counseling agencies utilizing the CSAB with a mailing technique and further emphasizes the importance of an adequate return rate as well as a standardized procedure for meaningful cross-agency comparison.

Method of Mailing

The general content and appearance of the series of letters used in the mailing is of critical importance. All letters should be written with an emphasis on informality and couched in terms of a personal appeal for help in the evaluation process. Efforts should be made to point out the unique importance of the

recipient in having information and opinions critical to the evaluation of the agency. The appearance of a personal letter can be attained by typing a master copy of the body of the letter, using it to reproduce the necessary number of letters for the survey with a photocopying technique, and typing the individual address and salutation with the same typewriter and ribbon used to type the master. Checking with staff members to assure the appropriateness of first name usage in the salutation and a live signature by a figure of legitimate authority (e.g. agency director) adds to the effectiveness of the letters. The importance of a personal plea in increasing response rate in survey techniques has been well demonstrated by Robinson and Agisim (1951), Longworth (1953), and others. The content of the follow-up letters should be written to shift emphasis from the evaluation itself to the importance of the client responding the questionnaire.

The system for securing an adequate response rate to mail questionnaires adopted for the Colorado State University data bank is described below and is an adaptation of Robin's survey (1965) of a combination of methods. Essentially, the procedure consists of a minimum of two and a maximum of six contacts with potential respondents.

1. The first contact may be a pre-questionnaire letter sent prior to the questionnaire itself. The contents explain that the respondent will be receiving an evaluation questionnaire shortly and that he is in a unique position to make a contribution to the evaluation. It also contains a simplified explanation of the evaluation rationale, its importance, and possible application. The assurance of confidential handling of all information is important.

2. The second contact, sent after no more than seven days, may consist of the questionnaire and a cover letter. The cover letter may remind the potential respondents of the previous letter, repeat its contents, and emphasizes the

inclusion of a stamped, self-addressed envelope. The respondent is thanked for his help in such a manner that the commitment of the respondent is taken for granted.

3. The first follow-up letter is brief in reminding the client of his lack of response and the importance of his contribution to the evaluation. A reminder that he received a stamped, self-addressed envelope for his convenience in responding is mentioned.

4. The essential feature of the second follow-up is the inclusion of another copy of the questionnaire and another stamped self-addressed envelope. The accompanying letter notes strongly the mailing of the second questionnaire and envelope and is worded in such a way that it is seen as a convenience in the event the original one was misplaced.

5. The third follow-up again contains a reference to the stamped self-addressed envelope and invites the client to get in touch with the agency for another questionnaire if he has misplaced his copies.

6. A final follow-up is in the form of a phone call to the respondent in which the importance of his contribution to the evaluation process is reemphasized and the offer to send another copy of the questionnaire is extended.

The intervals between initial mailing and all succeeding follow-ups is an extremely important consideration in the standardization of the data collection. Robin (1965) reviewed the research relevant to this and recommended a <u>seven day interval</u> for maximum response. For agencies participating in the Colorado State University data bank with widely dispersed geographic area represented by the clientele, this recommendation should be viewed as a minimum time lapse with eleven days the maximum.

Inasmuch as most counseling agencies do at least some routine data collection on a monthly basis, the evaluation procedure described here has been designed to take advantage of that. By having agency staff members review their case loads on a monthly basis and close out those clients no longer being seen, a list of terminated clients may be sent questionnaires for evaluation feedback on a monthly basis. This not only provides for a control on elapsed time between termination of counseling and feedback assessment, but also results in periodic data that may be analyzed and/or interpreted on a month to month basis.

In order to insure an optimum level of standardization of data collection procedures for the Colorado State University data bank, only data collected using no fewer than two of the six possible contacts are used. This minimum contact may consist of a combination of either steps 1 and 2, a pre-questionnaire letter and the questionnaire mailing, or steps 2 and 3, the questionnaire mailing and a follow-up. All additional steps that an agency can undertake to implement are encouraged so that as high a response rate as possible will be achieved.

The critical role of record keeping and data collection in counseling center efforts to maintain relevant effectiveness has been explained, and the importance of a data bank in utilizing that information acknowledged. The Colorado State University data bank has been described in pointing out the salient features of an effort to provide for the essential ingredients of a comprehensive, efficient, and effective system of ongoing data collection and analysis. An agency that participates in the data bank not only adds important data to the pool already in existence, but also receives a summary print out from every other participating institution for use in comparative evaluations. In this way an agency's efforts in the direction of service evaluation may be carried out utilizing both institutional feedback as well as nationwide standardized feedback from other institutions. The effective use of both feedback sources can greatly enhance agency and individual competence.

Summary

Counseling center efforts to establish and maintain relevant effectiveness in the services they offer must be based on valid and reliable feedback from critical sources. Record keeping and data collection are the procedures by which this feedback can be acquired if they are designed to answer questions and do not become ends in themselves. A follow-up questionnaire and mailing procedure designed to provide both descriptive and evaluative data can be most useful in producing data useful in a number of important ways in the assessment of agency response to environmental needs. Cross-agency comparisons have great potential and emphasize the importance of the development of a data bank equipped to handle both descriptive and evaluative material. The Counseling Services Assessment Blank was recently developed and adopted, along with a standardized mailing for the evaluation of counseling center feedback through a data bank being developed at Colorado State University. This data bank will make possible cross-agency comparisons of evaluative data for the first time. Feedback assessment of the type described here is essential for improvement in the effectiveness of both individual staff and agency programs.

For additional information concerning the Colorado State University Data Bank write: Rocky Mountain Behavioral Sciences Institute, Inc., P.O. Box 2037, Fort Collins, Colorado 80521

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CAUSE

Problem-Goals	Lack Information about Self (1)	Lack Information about Environment (2)	Conflict with Self (3)	Conflict with (Significant Others (4)	Lack of Skill (5)	Total
Vocational (1)	1-1	1-2	1-3	1-4	1-5	
Emotional (2)	2-1	2-2	2-3	2-4	2-5	
Educational (3)	3-1	3-2	3-3	3-4	3-5	
Total						

Figure 1 Problem-Goal and Cause Dimensions of the Missouri Diagnostic Classification Plan